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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 006370

SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR POUNDS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES WOO THE RELIGIOUS VOTE

Classified by A/DCM Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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1. (C) As the presidential candidates jockey for votes, religion is playing a prominent role. Cairo salons are abuzz with rumors that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) appears to be considering overtures from the NDP, the Ghad, and the Wafd parties. The MB leadership has not yet said if it will support a candidate or boycott the presidential poll, as some MB activists have urged. On the other side of Egypt's religious divide, Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III generated significant controversy when he affirmed the Church's support for Mubarak's reelection. Christian and Muslim critics have attacked the Pope for his stance, decrying it as an unacceptable interference by a religious leader in politics. The Church's decision to suspend a priest who supports Ayman Nour's Ghad party has raised more questions about the bias of the Coptic Orthodox leadership towards Mubarak. The September 7 presidential election offers both the MB and the Coptic Church a chance to showcase their putative political power, but it is more likely to showcase the divides that characterize Egyptian politics and society. End summary.

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If not a King, Perhaps a King-Maker  
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2. (SBU) A spate of recent press speculation on the MB's possible role in the September 7 elections suggests that the NDP, as well as the two leading opposition parties, the Ghad and the Wafd, are courting Egypt's banned but tolerated Islamist opposition. Although the MB leadership has not yet announced its course of action, it does appear that the group is carefully considering its options. The NDP has not made any public statements about an alliance with the MB, but both Ghad and Wafd have indicated that they seek MB support for their presidential candidates, Ayman Nour and No'man Gom'a respectively, and that, if victorious, they would seek to integrate the MB more completely, and legally, into Egyptian political life.

3. (SBU) The NDP needs to be circumspect in any courting of the MB since the government-ruling party apparatus has been at pains over the years to portray the MB as a dire threat to national security. Some press reports--and the Cairo rumor mill--suggest that the ruling party is considering how it might make common cause with the outlawed Islamists in a move that would secure Mubarak's democratic election. In return, the MB could expect a relaxation of GOE restrictions on its activities, perhaps permitting the MB in the upcoming parliamentary elections to win more than the 17 "independent" seats it currently holds.

4. (C) The MB's total membership numbers, as well as the willingness of this membership to adhere in lockstep to directives on voting from the MB leadership, are unknown. The widespread conventional wisdom, however, is that the MB represents the single-largest bloc of the "opposition," and that this bloc would be a major prize for whichever presidential candidate managed to win its allegiance. Also likely to be discussed in any MB negotiations with the NDP would be the issue of MB detainees, currently estimated to be in the low hundreds after many of the activists detained in connection with spring 2005 demonstrations were released earlier in the summer. One final option for the MB in the presidential contest would be to boycott, in protest of its exclusion from the process, as it did with the May 25 referendum.

5. (C) Comment: The likelihood of an alliance between the NDP and the MB strains credulity, especially given the long history of charges and counter-charges that the ruling party and its rival have traded over the years. As recently as August 14, more than one thousand MB demonstrators held a rally, contained by a similar number of riot police, in which they denounced Mubarak as a corrupt dictator who used the security services to subjugate the nation. Despite this bad blood, there have been persistent rumors of the "politics makes strange bedfellows" variety that the release of several

hundred MB detainees in June and July was part of a deal to secure MB support for Mubarak's presidential bid in exchange for "permission" for the MB to field a significantly increased slate of candidates for the parliamentary elections. The MB has said it will announce its position on the presidential election on August 21. This may provide more clarity. End comment.

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Render therefore unto Caesar?  
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16. (SBU) On July 29, Pope Shenouda III, in a statement undersigned by 71 of the 115 bishops in the Coptic Orthodox Church, endorsed Mubarak's reelection and urged Egypt's estimated seven million Copts to support their president. Mubarak's "wisdom, tolerance, (and) deep experience in managing the country's affairs," as well as his strong relations with world leaders, make him, in the eyes of Shenouda and his bishops, the best qualified candidate. Shenouda issued his statement from the United States, where he was undergoing an eye operation. Just before departing Cairo, the Pope had met with Zakaria Azmy, the presidential chief of staff. It is not clear why more than 30 percent of the bishops did not sign the Pope's statement.

17. (SBU) Shenouda's statement, coming on the heels of a pronouncement earlier in the summer when he had noted his belief that it was "natural" for Egypt's president to be drawn from Egypt's Muslim majority, sparked a flurry of criticism. Most Coptic critics, as well as those supporting the opposition, focused on the fact that Shenouda's statement served to diminish the ability of individual Copts to play independent roles in the multi-party election. Islamist critics of Shenouda gleefully pointed out that Shenouda's move effectively undermined the separation of Church and State that has largely characterized modern Christianity. In support of Shenouda, his backers argued that his statement simply reflected an acknowledgment of Egypt's political realities, and would serve to insure Mubarak's support and protection of the sometimes beleaguered Coptic minority.

18. (SBU) Independent Coptic Orthodox analyst and publisher Yousef Sidhom, who himself endorses Mubarak for reelection, summed up the views of many critics when he wrote on August 14 in Watani newspaper (which serves the Coptic community) that the Pope's call for Copts to support Mubarak was "inconsistent with democratic practice. It confiscates the Copts' rights to free political inclination and commitment, and bypasses their Egyptian identity in favor of their Coptic one, reducing them to mere subjects of the Church."

19. (SBU) One subject of the Church who has not fared well in recent days is Father Philopater Gamil, parish priest of Giza's Virgin Mary Church, whose association with Ayman Nour's Ghad Party has, the priest claims, led to his suspension from his priestly duties. In comments to the press, the priest lashed out at the GOE, saying that his suspension had been engineered by the security services who were worried about his ability to mobilize Coptic voters for Nour. If confirmed, Gamil's suspension would provide additional evidence of the Coptic leadership's close relations with the ruling party.

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Comment  
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10. (C) The impact of the presidential campaigns vying for the religious vote remains uncertain. In the case of the overtures to the MB, the impact will be determined first by the MB leadership's decision on which candidate, if any, to support. Secondly, if the leadership decides to back a particular candidate, the impact will depend on the willingness of the membership, whose total numbers are clouded in mystery, to act on the leadership's decision. It is a commonplace view held by Egypt watchers that the MB is the largest opposition bloc (officially banned, but tolerated within limits) in the country, and that the MB would win significant votes in a truly free and fair election. It remains to be seen if the MB will seize upon the opportunity of the September 7 presidential election to prove that it can be a major player in Egypt's evolving democracy. If the MB opts to support one candidate in the election, and demonstrably boosts the votes for that candidate, this event would mark a major show of the MB's power. If the MB opts to boycott the presidential election, however, we will be no closer to understanding the organization's much vaunted but unproven power.

11. (C) In the case of Egypt's Coptic Orthodox Christian community, which is widely believed to number about 12 percent of the population (about seven-eight million people, although there are no reliable figures to support this), the value of Shenouda's gesture, in terms of votes delivered to the Mubarak campaign, is debatable. It is not at all clear that Copts will vote as a bloc. Cynicism and apathy towards

the Egyptian political scene, and even hostility towards the long-standing Mubarak-Shenouda alliance, which some Copts decry as a key cause of continued discrimination against Copts in Egypt, may all combine to lessen the benefits to Mubarak of Shenouda's support. End comment.

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